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Designed by Beth Sparkman

Edited by Ramona Cramer Tucker

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Quit horsing around, Nickers! Bow!" I tickled my white Arabian's belly and tried to rein in my famous temper.

I love my horse more than anything, and Nickers is a fast learner. I'd taught her half a dozen tricks in under two weeks. But she can be as stubborn as I am. We'd been training all Saturday in the pasture behind my barn. Dusk had moved in on a breeze that shook the last fall leaves off oaks and poplars, and Nickers hadn't bowed once for me.

I'd only had time to teach my horse tricks because I was temporarily out of problem horses to train. When my dad moved my sister, Lizzy, and me to Ashland, Ohio, two big things happened. I got my own horse, Nickers. And I

became Winnie the Horse Gentler because I was the only one who could gentle my Arabian.

I'd learned all about horses from my mom. Mom used to say I would have made a great horse. It's true—I'm better with horses than people.

Back in Wyoming, Mom had her own ranch. She'd earned a reputation for "gentling" horses instead of "breaking" them. When she died two years ago, Dad sold everything and drove Lizzy and me eastward. But he couldn't settle down, and I'd spent fifth and sixth grades in the *I* states, zigzagging from Illinois to Indiana to Iowa.

Ashland, Ohio, had shown up like an answer to a prayer nobody prayed. We'd been here four months, and I'd already started seventh grade and gentled several horses. Plus I had a part-time job at Pat's Pets, answering horse e-mail questions on the Pet Help Line. I was still boarding Towaco, my friend Hawk's Appaloosa, but I'd returned my last problem horse, a hunter, to her owner. And I wasn't expecting more clients until spring.

I blew into Nickers' nostrils, a horse greeting to let her know I wasn't really angry about her not bowing. We were friends training each other. She blew back, saying she understood.

I returned to a trick she'd mastered. "Nickers, how many days until our performance?" I'd trained her by tickling behind her front leg. Now all I had to do was crook my finger.

Nickers pawed the ground with each bend of my finger: *one, two, three, four, five, six*. Six days till November 12, Mom's birthday.

Pictures of past birthdays flashed through my mind. We always watched *Lady and the Tramp* in the morning and ate spaghetti for lunch. Then, in the afternoon, Mom always put on a horse show for Dad, Lizzy, and me.

My brain had snapped detailed photos of Mom's horse shows. Mom used to say she'd known from the day I was born that I had a photographic memory. Dad had teased her about it until they had me tested and found out she was right. I can't control the "camera" in my head, so lots of the pictures are things I wish hadn't been stored, like the ones of the car accident that killed my mom.

But I was grateful for each birthday picture that popped into my head as I scratched Nickers' neck. I could see Mom, with dark hair and freckles just like mine, smiling from the back of her bowing buckskin. Another picture

showed a black Mustang lying flat on the ground with Mom lying beside her. The pictures rolled at their own speed, ending with the Quarter Horse Mom had taught to do everything except cook breakfast.

Then a different picture exploded inside my head: Mom proudly showing us her birthday cake. Every year green icing spelled out the same verse from the book of Hebrews: *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*

I stroked Nickers' white fuzz, the beginnings of her winter coat, and let the green letters fade in my mind. So many things *weren't* the same. Mom was dead. Dad had changed from an insurance boss to an odd-job handyman and part-time inventor. Even Lizzy was changing, getting more involved in school stuff.

Dad and Lizzy and I needed this birthday to pull us back. For the first two birthdays after Mom died, we'd watched the movie and eaten the spaghetti. This time I wanted to surprise them and have the horse show. Nickers and I had exactly six days, starting tomorrow, to learn to bow.

"Cool."

I jumped, even though I should have been

used to the way Catman Coolidge can sneak up on a person. “Nickers,” I said, not turning around, “is it rude to sneak up on people?” I pointed to the ground, our signal for yes.

Nickers bobbed her beautiful head in a dramatic yes.

“Far out!” Catman exclaimed.

I grinned at him. He was wearing a tie-dyed shirt, a denim vest, and striped bell-bottoms fraying over the tops of his moccasins. With his wire-rimmed glasses, he seems older than an eighth-grader. And he looks like the longhaired protesters and hippies in the Vietnam chapter of my history book.

“Nickers, is Catman as smart as you?” I moved my hand to her withers.

Nickers picked up my withers cue and shook her head *no*.

“Colonel sees that, he’ll make you groove with his circus,” Catman warned.

“Can’t believe I’m finally going to meet your great-grandfather!” I’d heard stories about “the Colonel.” He was a World War II hero who now ran a traveling circus. And he was bringing his whole circus to Ashland for the season’s last two performances. “Can you get Lizzy and me

tickets for Thursday night?" Friday night, the last show, would probably be better. But that was Mom's birthday, and I'd be putting on my own horse show.

I unhooked Nickers' leadrope, but she stayed put. "Catman, do you know the circus people with the horse acts? Could you ask them how they get their horses to bow?"

"Ask them yourself." Catman's Siamese-blue eyes twinkled.

"I need to know before Thursday. Didn't you tell me they'd be performing in a different town every night on the way to Ashland?" I asked.

"Colonel Coolidge's Traveling Circus never rests," he answered. "They're in Loudonville tonight." Catman turned toward our house. "Let's split."

I stared after Catman. "Tonight?" Loudonville was only a few miles away, but how were we supposed to get there?

"The Barkers are coming by!" he hollered, evidently reading my thoughts. He stopped to pet my barn cat, Nelson. "Barker's in the show."

"Our Barker?" Eddy Barker's in seventh grade like I am. He loves dogs as much as Catman loves cats and I love horses.

I kissed Nickers and followed Catman, dodging the junk and machine parts that littered our lawn, stuff my dad calls “works-in-progress.” “What’s Barker do in the circus?”

“Dogs.” Catman reached the front steps and opened the door for me.

I ran inside and found Dad kneeling in front of a weird metal box on the kitchen floor. “Dad, is Lizzy back from her lizard hunt yet?” In her four months in Ashland, my sister had set up a farm for lizard refugees. She knows more about bugs, reptiles, and amphibians than any teacher I’ve ever had. Lizzy also baby-sits Barker’s five little brothers. I knew they’d want her to come with us.

“Lizzy? Here?” Dad twisted two wires together. He wouldn’t have known if Godzilla were here. Our mom had done such a great job as mom that Dad was still learning how to be a dad. He reminded me of a Saddle Horse Mom had bred in Wyoming. For a week after the mare foaled, she seemed surprised by motherhood. You could tell she loved her foal. She just didn’t know what to do with it.

“Never mind, Dad.” I checked all four rooms of our rental house, ending back in the kitchen.

Catman was holding a foil strip while Dad screwed it to the box. “Did you know . . .” Dad grunted between turns of the screwdriver “. . . that the microwave . . . was invented after a researcher . . . walked by a radar tube and his candy bar melted in his pocket?”

I stared at the box contraption. “You’re reinventing the microwave?”

Dad patted the box as if it were his third child. “Winnie, you’re looking at a cold-a-wave! If I can get this to work, you’ll be able to put in a warm glass of water and in seconds take out a cold glass of water!”

Note to self: Tell Dad to invent the ice cube.

Actually, I was kind of proud of Dad for inventing stuff—except when his inventions embarrassed me, like the backward bike I had to ride to school or the shoe alarm that accidentally got our school a free fire drill. Dad had even gotten up enough nerve a while ago to enter an invention contest. He’d never be famous, but playing with his inventions made him happy and kept us in Ashland.

A horn beeped outside.

“Dad, Barkers are here! Okay if I go to the circus with them—in Loudonville?”

“Circus?” Dad stuck his head inside the cold-a-wave.

“Elephants, horses, clowns . . . ?” I prodded.

“Have fun!” Dad shouted, but from inside the box it sounded more like *harumm*.

I followed Catman to the door. “Bye, Dad!” I shouted back.

He didn’t answer. Probably still had his head in the cold-a-wave. In Wyoming, Dad had gone to his office in Laramie six days a week, but I couldn’t remember saying good-bye to him even once. I think he left before I got up in the morning. Sometimes he came back after I’d gone to bed. Even if we did say good-bye, I don’t think we ever hugged. And after Mom’s accident, I know we didn’t. Dad and I barely touched, apologizing for it when we did.

But things were getting better.

“Be there in a minute, Catman!” I ran back to Dad. I’m short, and Dad’s tall, so with him kneeling before the cold-a-wave, our heads were even. I hugged him. His curly, black hair scratched my cheek. “Bye, Dad.”

Dad sat back on his heels. The corners of his mouth curled up, and his Adam’s apple jerked. “Bye, Winnie. Thanks.”

I turned and ran to the Barker van, grateful for the chilly wind on my face.

“Where’s Lizzy?” Mark Barker demanded as I climbed into the middle seat next to Catman. Mark is seven and a coltlike version of his stocky dad. Mr. Barker used to play football for Ashland University, where he and Mrs. Barker teach now.

I had to step over Mark’s chocolate Lab and Johnny’s black-and-tan coon dog, both strapped into little dog seat belts on the floor, Dad’s invention. William’s collie and Luke’s Chihuahua barked from the backseat. Barker had rescued strays and trained one for each of his brothers.

Johnny, Luke, and William, the three youngest Barkers, fired questions at me like it was my fault Lizzy wasn’t there.

“Guys!” Mrs. Barker called back. She and Granny Barker took up the front seat, with Matthew in between them. Mrs. Barker was the designated driver of the Barkers’ yellow van, which looked more like a school bus. She’s tall, with short, black hair and a deeper brown skin than most of her kids. “I think what you gentlemen meant to say was, ‘Hello, Winnie and

Catman. Glad *you're* here.'" She grinned at us in the rearview mirror, and I caught her winking at her husband in the backseat.

Sometimes I try to imagine what breeds people would be if they turned into horses. Mrs. Barker might be a graceful Tennessee Walker. Mr. Barker would make a good-natured Percheron. The boys are wild Mustangs, except for Barker, who's a steady Morgan.

"So tell me about Barker's act," I asked as we left Ashland, heading south.

Mr. Barker leaned forward, where he was wedged between kid car seats. "Eddy's a clown!"

"A dog-trainer clown!" Mark added, pride pouring out of each word. "And he's using Irene!" He stroked his Lab.

"And Chico!" Luke shouted.

"Macho gonna be star!" four-year-old Johnny announced. He glanced at William, the only Barker younger than he is. "William's dog, too!"

"Congratulations!" I couldn't help envying the Barker kids, with *two* great parents. I shook it off and turned to Matthew. At age nine, he's the only Barker who doesn't have a permanent smile. His bulldog was the only absent Barker dog. "Where's Bull, Matthew?"

Matthew Barker remained face-front, arms crossed.

The car grew silent.

"Matthew's dog . . . has a mind of his own," Mr. Barker offered. "I'm sure he'll come around before the Ashland circus. This has all happened rather fast. Two clowns got the flu. Trixie, the main trick dog, just had puppies. So the Colonel asked Barker to fill in, probably to get on Granny's good side."

Catman leaned in. "The Colonel digs Granny Barker."

Granny Barker kept staring out the window as if she didn't even hear the rest of us. Barker said that sometimes she probably doesn't know what's going on around her. But most of the time, she takes it in. And when she *does* decide to talk, it's always something worth waiting for.

Mrs. Barker sighed. "I don't think Trixie's owner, Jimmy Something-or-other, is too happy about Eddy's stepping in."

"Jimmy Green *Dinglehopper*," Catman said.

We drove through Loudonville to the fairgrounds and parked in the makeshift lot. The van doors slid open, and the Barker boys and their dogs scrambled out.

“We need to get these dogs to Barker!” Mr. Barker shouted, struggling to hold on to two-year-old William with one hand and Underdog’s leash with the other. “Catman, Winnie, we’ll see you inside!”

I climbed out Catman’s door. A huge red-and-white-striped tent billowed in the distance. On the top waved a small yellow flag with *Circus* in white letters, as if anybody couldn’t tell by the smell of peanuts and cotton candy and the sounds of organ-grinder music and throngs of laughing spectators.

“Funky, huh?” Catman whispered.

We weaved through crowds swarming the midway, past food stands on wheels, their lids propped up.

Catman cut over to a group of trailers. At the end of the row an elephant groaned, then flipped straw onto its back. Two men in gladiator costumes dashed by us. A muscular woman in a sequined bathing suit yelled at a man who would have made a tough Welsh Cob pony.

Catman walked straight to a group of lion cages on wheels. “Neat-o. These cats are happening.”

Two of the lions stopped their growling and paw-swatting to stare at Catman.

I took a deep breath of lions and sawdust and . . . *horse!*

I peered past the cages, beyond the circus tent, to a long rectangular tent. I could just make out the sign: *Menagerie Tent*. A horse whinnied, and out of the tent stepped the most gorgeous black stallion I'd ever seen. His long, black mane flowed over a thick, arched neck. On his back sat a kid I guessed to be older than Catman. His wavy, black hair matched his stallion's. He was riding English-style in a red-and-gold uniform. He lifted his hat, and the powerful stallion tipped his nose to the ground in a grand bow.

"Catman . . . that horse . . ." My voice, which always sounds a little hoarse, came out a croak.

Suddenly the stallion bucked. His rider grabbed for the saddle and missed. The horse bucked again, and the boy flew off. The black stallion exploded into a gallop.

Someone screamed.

People scrambled out of the horse's path.

I stayed planted in the runway and watched

as the most powerful stallion I'd ever seen came barreling straight at me.

